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US strategic thinkers debate pros and cons of using 'proxy states'

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The Soviet Union has successfully used certain of its third-world allies to intervene on its behalf in touchy areas — in other words, to act as "proxies."

Some strategic thinkers believe the United States, too, should make use of proxies.

ANALYSIS

The attractions for either superpower of acting through third-world proxies are clear: Political acceptability of the surrogate for military actions that would be deemed "imperialist" if done directly by the superpower; avoidance of direct conflict with the other superpower; lack of direct casualties; and a potential for "distancing," in case of defeat, without an intolerable loss of prestige.

The Soviet use of proxy or "surrogate" forces in the third world was first seen in Africa.

In 1975, several-thousand Cuban troops were deployed to Angola in an effort to secure the besieged Marxist regime of Augustinho Neto. Carried out in coordination with the Soviet Union, Cuban troop strength ultimately swelled to 25,000 to 30,000. It remains so to this day.

In 1978, Cuban troops were again deployed — this time to Ethiopia. Under direct Soviet command, they

brought victory to the regime of Ethiopian leader Mengistu Haile-Mariam against Somali forces in the disputed Ogaden region. About 5,000 Cubans still remain there.

Western observers have since broadened the definition of proxy forces when referring to the actions of Soviet allies. Not only out-of-area deployments such as Cuba's in Africa, but the regional military actions of Vietnam in Indochina, Syria in the Middle East, and Libya in Africa have been lumped into the proxy category.

One analytical school believes a number of guerrilla organizations that use terror tactics and Soviet weapons — including the Palestine Liberation Organization — should be included in the Soviet-proxy category.

The degree of actual control enjoyed by the Soviets over their allies is debatable, particularly in the cases of Syria and Libya. It can be argued, however, that the Cuban missions in Ethiopia and Angola have been successful in the sense that both of those regimes have survived thus far.

The proxy idea holds a fascination for some American strategic planners who have toyed with creating such a capability in certain third-world areas. Categories of po-

tential cooperative forces are:

- States which would be available to intervene in target areas distant from their own borders. To do so requires a mixture of ideological commitment, internal political cohesion, and military efficiency which is uncommon in the West. Israel, South Korea, and Taiwan have the requisite military prowess. But none of these states are likely to risk intervention in areas not of direct concern to themselves, even with US urging. And each state has its own set of liabilities in certain areas — Israel in the Islamic world, for example.

- States which would agree to assume security responsibility for a neighboring region, and engage in contingency planning with the US for prospective intervention. This concept is more practical than the global availability required in the preceding category. A regional power such as Egypt, has plenty of motivation to monitor developments in the Sudan and to intervene in the face of a leftist or Libyan takeover. The West shares this interest.

- States willing to sustain a pro-Western insurgency in a bordering country. A well-publicized example is Honduran aid to the "contras" in Nicaragua.

- Insurgents willing to engage in insurrection against a state hostile to the West. Current anticommunist insurgencies can be found in Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Angola, and Kampuchea.

Although many US defense experts believe the possibility of developing pro-Western global surrogate forces akin to Cuba is fantasy, governments willing to plan contingency actions in their own backyards are available. Both insurgencies and states willing to support them can be found. Some are already supported by the West.

But as shown by wrenching debate over the propriety of US involvement with the Nicaraguan contras, the political toll is high indeed when insurgency is prolonged. The West does not appear to have reached a consistent consensus on the moral desirability of fomenting insurgency against its enemies.

Yet the proxy concept continues to intrigue policy planners, despite its difficulties. A recent Rand Corporation seminar of defense experts focused exclusively on the issue, and another session will be held this fall.

The writer was a government official for two decades before becoming a consultant on international affairs.